

# Roaming The Range American Style: Where Deer, Antelope and Americans Play

By Tom Zito

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pg. B1

## Roaming The Range American Style

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The O'Rourkes' car radiator blew up, the head of the family explained, "because that damn rhinoceros just wouldn't move."

Mr. O'Rourke, the Missus, Johnny and Lawrence as well as their 1969 Ford Fairlane were stranded in the "Umfolozi Reserve." They'd been inching their way along the three-mile drive-through zoo at Lion Country Safari in Doswell, Va., when a white rhino decided to sit down in front of their car. The air-conditioner was fighting the 95-degree sunbake, the engine was moaning hotter and finally—splurt—the safety valve flew off the radiator and the O'Rourkes were stuck. Soon after, a truck pulled up with water and they were back on safari.

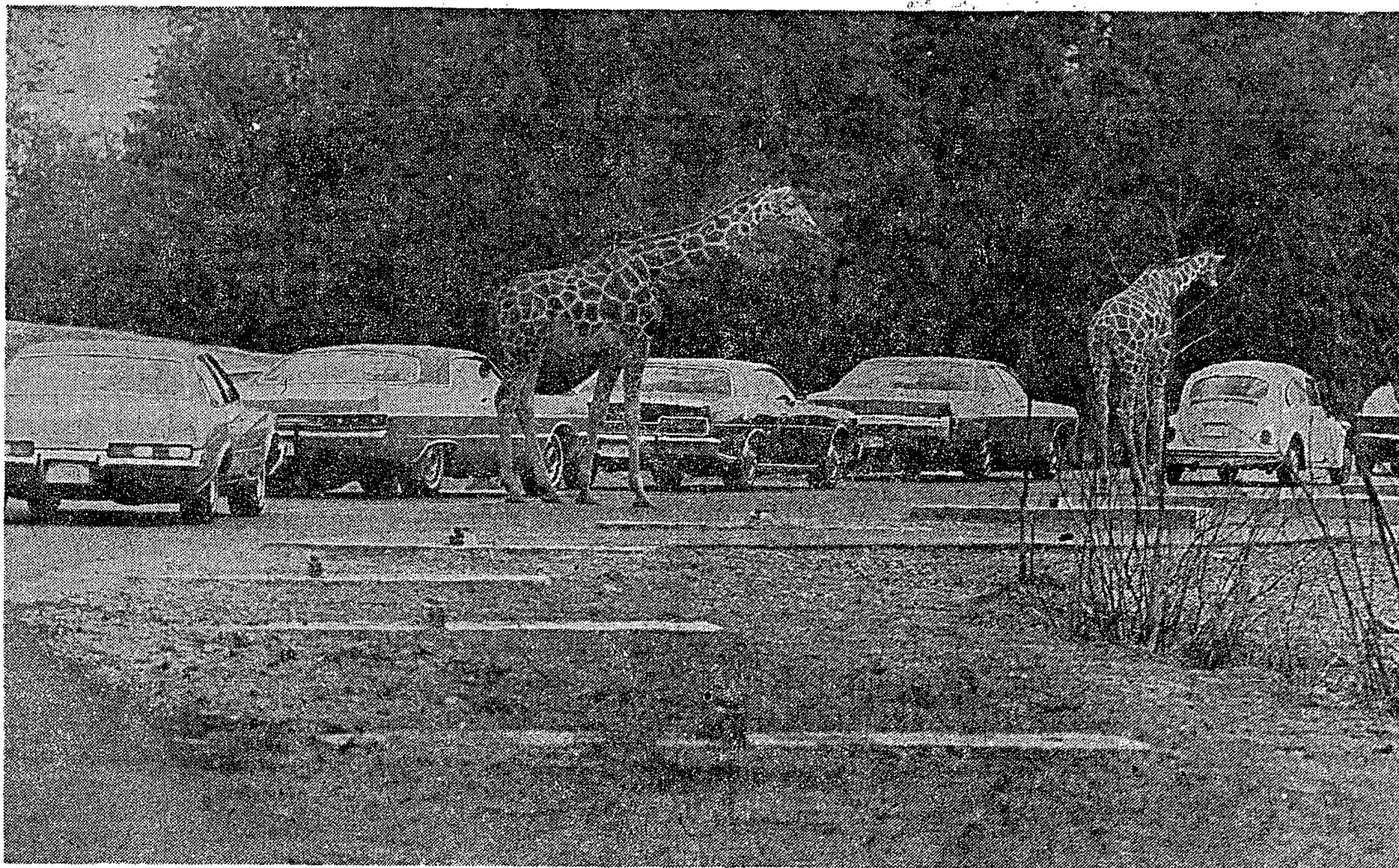
Add the American love of animals to this country's automobile addiction and the drive-through zoo is inevitable—and rapidly becoming one of the hottest ideas in the entertainment industry. Since the first one was established in Palm Beach County, Fla., in 1967, eight more have been developed across the nation—five in the past year, two of them in the Washington area.

Involving minimum outlays of about \$10 million each, the new zoos are big business investments that appear to be paying off. Last year, with four of its six facilities open, Lion Country Safari, Inc.—a publicly held corporation that trades over-the-counter with the stock symbol GRRR—attracted 3.2 million visitors. They paid an average of \$3.50 each to ride two or three mile circuitous asphalt roads strung through brush and woodlands laced with several hundred wild animals.

In the past year, however, the zoos have increasingly been incorporated into larger family entertainment centers, "theme parks" on the scale of Disneyland or Walt Disney World.

In Doswell, for example, the Lion County Safari about 25 miles north

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Photos by Margaret Thomas and Ellsworth Davis—The Washington Post

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# Where Deer, Antelope and Americans Play

ZOO, From B1

of Richmond off Interstate 95, serves as a drawing card for Kings Dominion, a \$50 million, 1,300-acre park that will open next spring and feature a one-third scale, 33-story replica of the Eiffel Tower, a 60 m.p.h. roller coaster and an air-conditioned monorail journeying through the game preserve. The owners expect the safari alone to attract 750,000 people this summer.

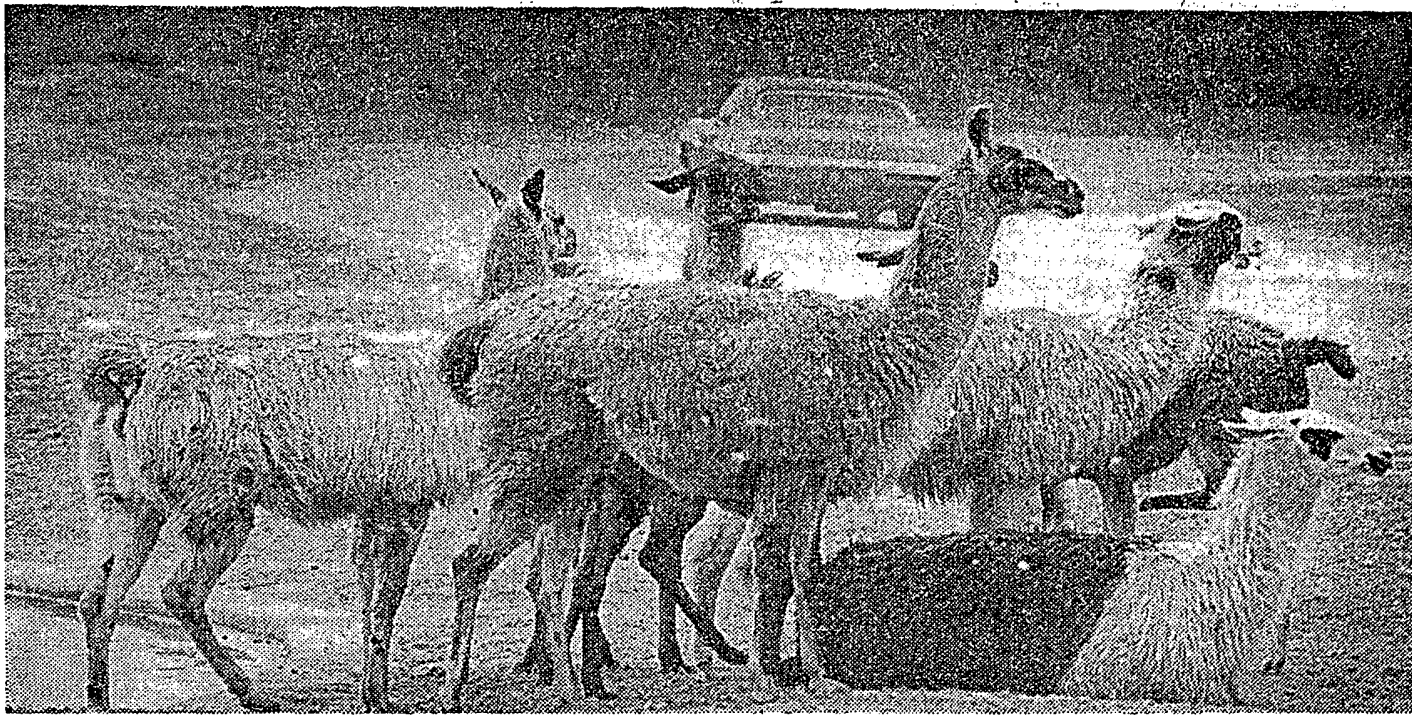
Earlier this month in Prospertown, N.J., a 2,000-animal drive-through zoo opened as part of Great Adventure, a \$100 million, 1,500-acre center for rides, restaurants and live entertainment. The Wildlife Preserve, four miles east of Beltway exit 33 in Largo, Md., is more restricted, devoted almost exclusively to animal displays. It expects 500,000 persons to visit this summer.

The approach to Doswell's Lion Country Safari gives the impression that the place is still under construction: mounds of dirt have been bulldozed into long rows and there are few trees to imply a natural habitat. Only the entrance sign and the steady chain of cars heading in are keys of business activity.

Inside, the traffic starts backing up. Young women in safari guide uniforms collect \$3.75 for each person over the age of 3 in the cars and then the rows of traffic merge into one lane that passes through a towering barbed-wire gate. Each car is given a zebra-striped cassette player with orchestrated narration, and pith-helmeted, uniformed "guards" insist all windows be rolled up—even if you've got no air-conditioning and it's 100 degrees outside.

The land is sparsely vegetated and in the afternoon heat the animals do little wandering, preferring to stay back under the few shade trees. Occasionally a giraffe meanders across the road, causing the kind of traffic jam only rain in Washington can normally create. Cars pull off to the side of the road as drivers snap photographs. The cassette machine cranks out dialogue: "... lions are basically lazy creatures ... keep your doors and windows closed ... on your right, the world's largest roller coaster, but more about that later ... (a taped lion roars) ..." Cars overheat. The traffic passes through several more barbed wire gates, designed to separate natural enemies among the animals. Three miles and about 30 minutes later the safari is over.

"A lot of people think the animals are drugged since they act so sluggish in the sun," says the park's Jack Yaeger. "But they're not,



Llamas at the Wildlife Preserve in Largo, Md.

By Margaret Thomas—The Washington Post

That's just the way they are when it's hot."

Outside the animal gates, there are a few other attractions: an exotic bird show, a petting pen ("Feed A Beast—15c"), a small-scale roller coaster and a snack bar featuring frozen bananas dipped in chocolate and sprinkled with chopped nuts.

The Wildlife Preserve near Largo, the first drive-through zoo owned and operated by the American Broadcasting Co. is similar to Lion Country Safari, although the grounds seem more wooded, the guards travel on horses instead of in jeeps, and the range of animal origins includes both Africa and the Americas. Information is supplied by tuning the car radio to 830 rather than by tape. Admission is \$3.75 for all over 12 and \$2.40 for children 5-12. Those under 5 are admitted free. The preserve opened last weekend and attracted about 22,000 visitors in two days. Some areas are still under construction and consequently some species—including the lion—are still not in the field.

Visitors' reactions to the local drive-through zoos are generally favorable, with a definite vein of criticism.

Helen Gordon said it took her an hour and a half to bring her three children from Rockville to Lion Country, but that "they enjoyed it immensely."

"An ostrich was pecking on the window!" exclaimed 9-year-old Brent Gordon.

"It was well worth the money," said Joyce Bishop, who had traveled 45 minutes from Richmond.

"It was a tremendous rip-off," said Bob Cohen of An-

nandale. "You stood in line for 20 minutes and didn't really see much. They should also charge by the car. We paid \$30 for eight of us. It's sure proof that there are an awful lot of affluent people in this country who can afford to spend \$15 for a family of four to go to the zoo."

Relatively new to this country, drive-through zoos originated in concept with the spacious game preserves scattered throughout Africa, where visitors can drive freely for hundreds of miles and see wild animals roaming the countryside.

In 1966 Harry Schuster, a South African attorney, decided that the popularity of the game preserves among American travelers to Africa suggested that smaller facilities established in North America might do booming business. The following year Schuster opened the first Lion Country Safari in this country, and attracted 1.2 million visitors in its initial 12 months.

"It's an entirely new experience," says Jerry Kobrin, Lion Country's vice president for public relations, in explaining the appeal of the facilities. "They're not driving through a zoo. The people are caged in their cars and the animals are roaming free. It's eyeball-to-eyeball contact. You're only a window away."

Kobrin says the drive-through parks get their animals from different sources: births in other facilities, trade-offs with public zoos and importation from Africa.

"You have to understand it's very difficult and expensive to bring animals over. Quarantines are very strict. And the prices! The going rate for a giraffe is \$15,000 plus transportation, which

amounts to about \$2,500. Lions are only worth about \$500. We're up to our navel in them. They like to sleep and make love."

In addition, it was discovered last month that lion dung is an excellent deer repellent. Since then, Lion Country Safari Inc. has been doing a brisk business moving 50-pound bags to gardeners whose fruits were being snatched by the animals. The \$5 donation for

the bag goes to the Frasier Foundation — named in honor of the late great progenitor—which, according to Lion Country Safari, makes contributions to various wildlife organizations.

According to spokesmen for both local facilities, the African animals adapt quite well to winter weather conditions here. Those that don't—like elephants and giraffes — are provided with heated winter quarters,

while others need only be sheltered from freezing rains. The Wildlife Preserve will send its reptiles and exotic birds south when it closes for the winter Oct. 31. The North American bear, wolves and bison there are already in their natural environment. Lion Country's rhinos will be housed in barns after it closes for the season Nov. 30.

Sue Pressman, director of wildlife protection for the Humane Society of the United States, calls drive-throughs "the most exciting new concept in zoo change we've seen in years. Unfortunately, though, they tend to be run by people new to the zoo business who don't have the kind of scientific back-up we'd like to see. They tend to pack cars into areas so densely that people don't really have a chance to observe the animals very much in their day-to-day routines. They use horrible barbed-wire fences to separate the animals, except for Great Adventure, which is really quite nicely done—like a golf course for animals. There's also a tendency to rip up all the terrain and then replant it later. And these horrible pens where they encourage children to pet pigs and goats ... Kids don't want to do that, but their folks do. Zoos are unfortunately designed by adults who don't know what kids want to do."